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Ravens have seen a lot of growth from Jimmy Smith

Cornerback had encouraging Super Bowl after so-so first two seasons, 'seems like a different guy right now'

By Aaron Wilson

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Shadowing wide receiver Torrey Smith, cornerback Jimmy Smith flipped his hips and matched his stride step for step.

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The tight coverage Smith applied during the Ravens' minicamp was a continuation of what he started in the final moments of the Super Bowl when he guarded San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Michael Crabtree to seal a victory.

With more diligent preparation this offseason having lost 10 pounds after taking up a boxing regimen, the 2011 first-round draft pick has impressed the coaching staff with how seriously he's taking his job after a lackluster first two seasons. Smith is building on the momentum he started in the postseason.

"A lot of growth from Jimmy," secondary coach Teryl Austin said. "He seems like a different guy right now. I think playing as well as he did the last two playoff games coming off the injury and coming into the offseason knowing that this is a big year for him.

"And he's really gotten himself into pretty good shape. Really studying, doing a lot of things that [he] maybe would have taken for granted the first two years. He's really stepped that up, and it's really shown in how he's played and how he's progressed this offseason."

The 6-foot-2 cornerback is down to a lean 200 pounds through his boxing regimen with a local trainer in Tiimonium.

"I feel great, I feel like I did in college," Smith said. "I actually did some boxing and trying to get my core strength. My trainers told me to work on that for my back and groin. I'm doing conditioning drills, speed bag, no heavy bag.

"A defensive back needs quick hands. The groin really hurt my game last year, playing through that all of last season and finally having surgery. Now that's better. I feel 100 percent better."

Smith finished the regular season with 31 tackles and no interceptions, but had a strong postseason where he displayed the potential the Ravens had identified in him as an All-Big 12 Conference selection at the University of Colorado.

A history of injuries, including a sports hernia surgery last season, has curtailed Smith's impact in his first two seasons, limiting him to five starts, 49 career tackles, two interceptions and 11 pass deflections.

Smith dealt with a high ankle sprain that prevented him from playing in four games as a rookie and also had a bout with back spasms.

At Colorado, Smith was rarely challenged.

The California native finished with 183 career tackles, 18 pass deflections and three interceptions.

He allowed only 11 completions in man coverage over the course of his junior and senior years, surrendering just one first down.

"He has taken major steps towards being all the player that we wanted him to be," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "Jimmy's biggest issue has been, I think two things: They never threw at him in college. They didn't even test him. He has been tested a lot more here, and that's helped him. And he's been injured quite a bit. Being healthy now is really going to help him."

Smith is battling for a starting job with veteran Corey Graham, a former Pro Bowl special-teams ace who thrived last season in a bigger coverage role, particularly in the playoffs when he intercepted Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning twice in an AFC divisional-round game.

"They both play really well," Harbaugh said. "Corey made a bunch of plays on the ball out here. He plays in a bunch of slot, and he plays outside. We were going through the walk-through, and he was working on his technique, peddle weave things. The guy is a tireless worker, and I would say the same about Jimmy. Jimmy is younger. I think he's patterning himself a little bit after Corey with the work habit part of it."

Graham and Smith are both lining up with the starting defense currently while Lardarius Webb works his way back from a torn anterior cruciate ligament suffered last season against the Dallas Cowboys.

"Anybody can emerge and be a starter," Smith said. "I've been wanting to be a starter since Day One, but God had a plan. I'm still just learning, trying to become a better player in the classroom and on the field, trying to diagnose plays and read things and be a student of the game."

"You always want to go uphill. You never want to digress. I'm trying to pick up where I left off and do even better. I feel like I've improved. Everything is a work in progress. I'm still trying to climb the mountain. I'm not where I want to be yet, but I'll be there."

However it shakes out in the fall, Smith and Graham both figure to have pivotal roles in a revamped defense that lost middle linebacker Ray Lewis to retirement, inside linebacker Dannell Ellerbe to the Miami Dolphins, cornerback Cary Williams to the Philadelphia Eagles and outside linebacker Paul Kruger to the Cleveland

Browns and safety Ed Reed to the Houston Texans.

"All those corners, I'm looking forward to seeing how that competition will play out," Harbaugh said. "You talk about the starting positions, and it will be interesting who wins. Who is the top two? Who is the top three?"

"Absolutely, I get that, but they are all going to play, and they are all going to have to play like starters. I feel really good about the fact that we have a number of corners that are capable of doing that really well."

Graham has seen improvement from Smith, who didn't consistently apply himself in his first two seasons.

"He's doing well, too," Graham said. "He's in good position. He's getting his hands on a few balls. Obviously, it's a competition between me and him, but not just me and him, everybody."

"You want to go out there and you want to play. I'm going to go out there and do my best, and I'm pretty sure he's going to do the same. Whatever happens is what happens."

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